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India and Afghanistan: Abiding Ties

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परममयुता प्रज्ञा राष्ट्रभूयुदयसाधिका
Wisdom with valour brings glory to the nation

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India and Afghanistan: Abiding Ties

- *Professor Nirmala Joshi*

After arduous negotiations between the two rival contenders for the office of the President of Afghanistan, the Independent Election Commission announced Ashraf Ghani as the President and Dr Abdullah Abdullah as his Chief Executive. On 29 September 2014 Ashraf Ghani was sworn in as the President in Afghanistan first democratic transition of power. His assumption of the Presidency came at a time when an impending uncertainty lay ahead, not only for the country, but also for the region. The withdrawal process by the US and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) troops was expected to create a fundamental change in the security and geopolitical landscape of the region, a spring offensive by the insurgents was likely and at stake was protection of the new democratic experiment in coalition politics in Afghanistan. The stability of this experiment was imperative for peace in the country and the region.

In a tactical move President Ghani's first foreign policy initiative was a visit to China in November 2014 followed by visits to Pakistan, the U K and the US. There were also high level military exchanges between Afghanistan and Pakistan; General Raheel Sharif was in Kabul during this time. This flurry of visits sparked off a speculation in the Indian media in particular, that there was a fundamental shift in Afghanistan's priorities. It was re-prioritising its foreign policy goals. It was a shift away from the traditional close and friendly ties with India. This is a misreading of President Ghani's foreign policy moves.

India Afghanistan ties are based on a strong foundation of mutual trust, shared perception of strategic interests and cooperation. A rich legacy of historical interaction and cultural contacts are an integral part of the shared understanding between the two countries. Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore's short story 'Kabuliwala' has immortalised this interconnectedness.

Before proceeding further it is necessary to understand President Ghani's foreign policy moves.

Foreign Policy of Afghanistan under President Ashraf Ghani

In view of the unfolding new geopolitical situation President Ghani's immediate and urgent task was the strengthening and consolidation of his National Unity Government. In an article jointly written by President Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah in the Washington Post during their visit to the U S they highlighted their common security perceptions. They wrote “Weakened governments offer fertile grounds for violent groups opposed to the democratic way of life. We are responding to terrorism's threats by building partnerships at the global, regional, Islamic and national levels”. It implied that the several insurgent groups securely entrenched in the Afghanistan – Pakistan borderlands posed a grave threat to the stability of their government. From the perspective of security containing insurgency, if not destroying it, became the prime concern and motivation of President Ghani's foreign policy. Although the Taliban and other insurgent groups were in a state of disarray, regional terrorist networks had not been dismantled. The withdrawal process meant that the strong security cover provided by the Western coalition forces was no longer available. As a consequence defending the country's sovereignty and territorial integrity was the sole the responsibility of the Afghan forces. President Ghani was aware that Afghanistan could not independently initiate military action against the insurgents as the Afghan forces were not yet combat ready. Hence in the prevailing circumstances diplomacy was the only option.

Besides the Afghan leader also aimed at building bridges across Asia so as to carry forward the 'Istanbul Process ' initiated by the Heart of Asia Conference of November 2011, which envisaged Afghanistan emergence as a ' Land Bridge ' to Eurasia. Economic development, after decades of war fare, was the key to stability. The Afghan leadership recognized this fact and

opined, that “Political stability is built on the bedrock of economic growth”.

In view of these goals President Ghani undertook his first official visit to China in November 2014. Apart from participating in the Fourth Ministerial Meeting of the Istanbul process, it also gave President Ghani an opportunity to engage with the Chinese President Xi Jinping on issues of regional security. Since China also faced similar security challenges in its Western province of Xinjiang from the Uyghur insurgents, particularly the East Turkistan Liberation Movement (ETLM), President Ghani hoped that China would be able to prevail upon Pakistan, its close ally, to rein in the insurgents based on its territory. It needs no reiteration that China enjoys a high degree of influence with Pakistan. It is also well known that Pakistan considers some of the insurgents groups as “strategic asset.” In response to Afghan overtures China has initiated a Trilateral Dialogue between Afghanistan, Pakistan and China. It is not known whether any meeting of this Dialogue has taken so far.

Moreover given China's growing economic interests and investments in Afghanistan's mining and energy sector, its investments are over USD 2 billion. With the possibility of even more Chinese investments likely to come, its immediate interest lay in a secure and a stable Afghanistan. Now that China has pledged nearly USD 40 billion in building the 3000 km long economic corridor from Gwadar on the Arabian Sea to Kashgar in China, its stakes in regional security have risen phenomenally. It is imperative for the security of its investments and personnel to control the terrorists and their networks.

In seeking Chinese help in containing insurgency the Afghan President also sought Chinese mediation in facilitating the reconciliation process with the Taliban. China had earlier hosted two Taliban leaders in Beijing according to reports. However, similar efforts to bring round the Taliban to the negotiating Table by the US at Doha in Qatar had failed. It would not be wrong to say that at this juncture the Taliban would be reluctant to hold negotiations with any one, as it perceives a strong possibility of triumph. Probably China may not openly involve itself in the reconciliation process of

Afghanistan.

President Ghani, however, knows that the key to Afghanistan's security and stability lies with Pakistan. His visit to Pakistan should be seen from this perspective. But does Pakistan have the ability to control the insurgent groups on its territory in a comprehensive manner, or is it reluctant to do so, as some are considered as its strategic assets? The Taliban are a broad group that appears to have both hardcore and moderate elements. The hardcore are averse to any negotiations as their aim is to establish a state based on the Sharia. For them it is primarily an ideological struggle; a struggle between democracy and an order based on religion. The moderates are war weary and would like to end the constant fighting, but so far have not renounced violence nor shown a willingness to work within the Afghan Constitution. In this regard a major question that could arise is that even if the moderates accept the terms for reconciliation, will they be accommodated in the Afghan National Security Force (ANSF) or the Afghan National Police (ANA). Can they be trusted? Given the frequency with which insurgents change loyalties from one group to the other, this issue of their trustworthiness merits serious consideration by the Afghan leaders. What is required is the immediate need to plug the financial support to the insurgents, the easy availability of arms and ammunition, and denial of safe sanctuaries in Pakistan. Unless these issues are given importance curbing insurgency in a comprehensive manner may not be possible.

Secondly the rapprochement with Pakistan has inherent limitations. The hotly contested Durand Line, the Afghanistan – Pakistan border (2500) km is a major thorn in the flesh of the relationship. Pakistan wants Afghanistan to accept the Durand Line as the international border, while Afghanistan has so far shown no interests in settling the border without a satisfactory solution of the Pashtun issue. Consequently genuine rapprochement would depend on the resolution of this vexed and complex border dispute.

Later the British Prime Minister David Cameron initiated a trilateral meeting between Afghanistan, Pakistan and the U K on the issue of peace and stability in December 2014. In response the Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz

Sharif affirmed that a stable, prosperous and democratic Afghanistan was in Pakistan's best interests. It is hoped that Pakistan would be able to make good on its statement and implement it. At the same time President Ghani's visit to the US in March 2015 focused on the critical role the US can still play in Afghanistan's security and economic development. It is understood that the US may slow down the withdrawal of its troops from Afghanistan even after 2017.

The above mentioned are probably tactical diplomatic moves by the Afghan leadership in its national interest and should not be construed as a basic shift in its foreign policy. It is not a 'zero sum game'. On the other hand India Afghanistan ties are based on an enduring foundation of shared interests.

India – Afghanistan Relations in Perspective

When the Indian freedom movement was gaining momentum, an iconic figure from the North West Frontier Province, Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, was struggling to unite all the Pashtuns, who were located on either side of the Durrand Line. His 'Khudai Khitmatgar' movement aimed at a separate homeland for the Pashtuns. Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan drew inspiration from Mahatma Gandhi's non violent approach. After the partition of India, Afghanistan was the only country to have opposed Pakistan's membership to the United Nations on the ground of an unresolved Pashtun issue. Since independence, India and Afghanistan have had shared security, strategic and economic interests resulting in friendly and cordial relations.

During the cold war period both India and Afghanistan had opted for non alignment. Both these interested countries had unsettled border dispute with Pakistan, cementing their existing cordial ties. The divergence of interests began after fifty years, when the Soviet Union broke up in 1991; new independent entities arose in the region and importantly saw the rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan. The Taliban were fully supported by Pakistan in

pursuit of its idea of 'strategic depth vis-à-vis India. In the process, India lost all contacts with its traditional ally. In fact, the relations verged on hostility. However, India had maintained its contacts with the Tajiks and supported its leader Ahmed Shah Masood and the Northern Alliance when it came into existence.

The turn of the century also saw a turn in India Afghanistan relations. The Taliban were defeated, the US and NATO troops were involved in counter insurgency operations. The then new President Hamid Karzai had a modern outlook and stood for a democratic and a prosperous Afghanistan. This provided an excellent opportunity to India not only restore its past ties of friendship, but also to involve itself in the reconstruction effort. India's pro active role coincided with the broadening of its 'strategic vision 'which went beyond South Asia to include Asia. In Afghanistan India's involvement was primarily in the infrastructure sector, education, health care and in small and medium scale community development projects. Here mention must be made of the vital connectivity project, that was undertaken by India, and which provided Afghanistan a corridor to connect with the outside world through the Delaram-Zaranj 215 km long road. This overland route (600 km) connected Zaranj with the Chah Bahar port on the Gulf of Hormuz.

Subsequently India signed a Strategic Partnership Agreement with Afghanistan in October 2011. The Agreement aimed at capacity building in the security in particular in the post 2014 scenario. While signing the Agreement, Dr Manmohan Singh, then then Indian Prime Minister, stated that "India would stand by Afghanistan when foreign troops withdraw from the country in 2014." However India did not comply with Afghan President's request for military hardware, equipment and supplies. It is not clear why India dithered at that time. Was it averse to taking risk for fear of arousing Pakistan's hostility or was it lack of ability?

Apart from its inability to comply with the Afghan request for arms, did India make efforts to reach out to the Pashtun leadership? There have been stray reports in the media quoting Afghan Pashtun leaders as saying "India is not our enemy ". If India and Afghanistan are 'natural friends', then by the

same logic there are no 'natural enemies'. It is essential to develop links with the Pashtuns. The Khudai Khitmatgar movement of the past could be revived. In the present context it is essential to ascertain the views of the Pashtuns.

Another section that India needs to focus upon is the growing percentage of Afghan youth approximately 65 percent of the population. Many are generally uneducated and unemployed and are easy prey for the insurgents, who often lure them into nefarious activity with monetary incentives.

President Ghani's India Policy

The crux of President Ghani's India policy lies primarily in the economic sphere. Economic development and prosperity are as crucial as ensuring security for political stability. In fact Indian personnel are already involved in various reconstruction projects in Afghanistan. The mining and energy sectors hold immense promise for future investments by India. It is recognized by both India and Afghanistan, that the absence of direct connectivity is a limiting factor. During his recent visit President Ghani raised this issue. In an interview (Hindu 30 April 2015) President Ghani made a forceful plea , though obliquely, for reviving the ancient trade route that went from the Indian subcontinent to Afghanistan and then beyond. In the present context he pointed out, that the Afghanistan Pakistan Trade and Transit Agreement (APTTA) of 2011 allowed Afghan goods to go up to the Wagah border, and not Attari, but importantly Indian goods bound for Afghanistan were not allowed to transit through Pakistani territory.

In a very candid manner he raised the question of Afghanistan's sovereign equality, and stated that the APTTA gives both countries equal access up to its national boundaries. Elaborating further he said “if we are not given equal transit access, then we will not provide equal transit access to Central Asia “. Whether Afghanistan will be able to overcome Pakistan's intransigence and its exclusivist approach of excluding India on the transport corridor issue needs to be watched carefully. As a signatory to the

Istanbul Process and as a member of South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) which has the connectivity issue on its agenda , it is hoped that Pakistan would agree to allow access through its territory.

Meanwhile in order to facilitate the possibility of overland transport corridor India and Afghanistan are expected to sign a bilateral 'Motor Vehicle Agreement' within three months. It is plausible that other members of SAARC would also join this agreement, and hopefully Pakistan would also join it. Bangladesh and Myanmar, gateway to South East Asian countries are also keen to participate in this overland transport link to the region and beyond.

Meanwhile the Iranian option has helped India to reach out to Afghanistan and Central Asia. This is a vital link for India, and at present its only option. During President Ghani's recent visit to India, it was stated by the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi that India would take up the Chah Bahar project. Earlier India received twenty containers of dry fruits from the Chah Bahar port. Indian as well Iranian involvement in the further development of this project should be on a priority basis without any further delay. It must be mentioned, that a report in Pakistani newspaper Dawn noted that Afghan transit and trade dropped by 54 percent in 2012 – 2013 due to Chah Bahar.

Besides, President Ghani has offered incentives to Indian investors. Even in the absence of a short overland transport link to Afghanistan via Pakistan, there are areas such as internal infrastructure development especially provincial and rural roads, advance methods of agriculture, all round capacity building particularly of the youth, who need to be equipped with skills, training etc. During the recent visit Indian Prime Minister Modi stated that India would provide 1,000 scholarships to Afghan students till 2020-21. However, Indian investors need to be encouraged for they are averse to risk taking for their investments and personnel.

Politically both India and Afghanistan share their commitments to build open and democratic polities. There is much that Afghanistan could learn from the Indian experience in building democratic institutions.

However, a striking aspect of the visit was that the President down played the close cooperation in security and defence spheres. President Ghani has focused on the diplomatic instrument with China and Pakistan to achieve his goals of security and stability. Prime Minister Modi was rightly of the view that the reconciliation process should be 'Afghan-led and Afghan- owned. He said “These should be conducted within the framework of the Constitution of Afghanistan without the shadow of violence”. If regional peace is ensured on the above mentioned basis, it would be welcomed by all the stakeholders.

In his interview President Ghani made a distinction between the Islamic State (IS) or Dae'sh as he referred to and the Taliban. The former stands for destruction, while the latter is for capture of state power. This distinction needs further elucidation.

Concluding Observations

A striking aspect of India Afghanistan relations is that they encompass both the state and the nation. Given the vastly altered geopolitical situation, President Ghani has sought strategic understanding with China and Pakistan. Probably as a result of his diplomatic parleys, Taliban representatives are met with representatives of Afghanistan at Qatar on 3 may 2015. The outcome of these parleys will shape the future. The long term durability of Afghanistan – Pakistan partnership would depend on two fundamental issues; the resolution of the Durrand Line, the border dispute to mutual satisfaction and a comprehensive approach in tackling the various insurgents groups located on Pakistani territory, and not a selective one of considering some as strategic asset. Only time will tell the sincerity of this partnership.

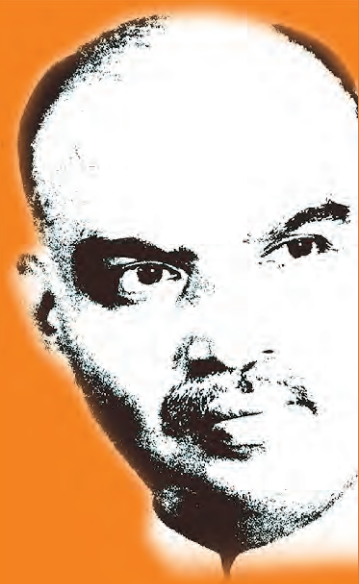
At this juncture a vigorous and a robust economic engagement with Afghanistan is India's forte. Such an engagement will enhance the basis of India Afghanistan relations. Undoubtedly the overland connectivity issue through Pakistan is essential. In fact opening this corridor offers a win-win



situation for all in terms of the huge transit revenues that would accrue to all. The Chah Bahar route must be energized both by India and Iran on a priority basis. Meanwhile there are other areas in which India could also gainfully get involved in Afghanistan. Apart from an active economic engagement it is equally critical for India to build bridges with the Pashtuns, while further consolidating ties with the Tajiks. The percentage of Afghan youth is large and merit attention in India's future strategy.

India and Afghanistan are natural friends and hence there are no natural enemies. The political leadership in both countries is sagacious and pragmatic to not allow differences of approach to affect the overall friendly tenor of the relationship.

“We have to strengthen our military position and if we cannot do it alone, we shall have to do it in collaboration with others with whom we can stand on a common ideology. Then, we shall have to strengthen internal strength and peace and satisfactorily solve the economic problem...so that we can create that solidarity and stability which would be impregnable both from the national and international standpoints.”



- Dr. Syama Prasad Mookerjee

(Participating in the debate on the “International Situation” in the Lok Sabha, 6th *December, 1950*)